You've Begun to Feel Like Home

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You've Begun to Feel Like Home

by fictionalfaerie

Summary

The one with the daemons.

Sometimes it takes a while to find where you belong in life, to figure out that the world isn't as black and white as you've always been taught it is.

Notes

First- rating/tag notes- this story is rated mature because of language and canon level violenty gory crime scene-ness.

There is a scene in which it's implied that some unsavory acts were performed on a corpse, but it's not explicitly stated and is probably nothing more than the show gave you. If you've reservations, feel free to ask me and I'll give you a rundown or tell you what to skip.

This is tagged as Will/Hannibal, and is also in a sense Brina/Velia since, hey, daemons--- however, it's a very slow build relationship, and there's no fun mature rating payout. Sorry.

If you find that I've missed any tags or warnings, please let me know. I get that I lead a very privileged life in that I don't have a great many triggers, but it makes identifying places that others might be triggered a bit difficult.

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This piece turned into a monster. It was originally a tiny idea - a snippet, really, that then a decent sized idea, and then I went "pfft, I can totally work that for the bang..." and it ate my brain.
With this fic, I came out of the fanfic closet to my boyfriend. I screamed and cried and flailed, as literally as possible. I wrote pages upon pages of outlines and plot notes and scenes, only to scrap them- well, some of them- there were a few I forgot I'd scrapped and had some last minute horror that my story didn't work because I was suddenly telling two different ones...

I've also never written something I'm more proud of, hands down.

If you want, I can give you literal pages of reasoning and backstory on the daemons featured in this story (and some not even mentioned because I tried to keep myself on track). Seriously, if that interests you, yell, I will happily share so it doesn't go to waste.

Crazy amounts of love and thank you's and just phwoof to the following:
~Kristi - - for her amazing, mindblowing artwork- she was incredibly sweet and made my first bang-challenge experience a phenomenal one, even though I probably dropped the ball on her a million times. ♥ ♥ ♥
~My Nikki, who held my hand and was an amazing cheerleader and beta, even when I ended up being sick and not being helpful at all to her on her fic. Without her, this fic would not have been finished, I'm 100% certain of this.
~My Chrissy, who isn't even in this fandom but let me cry and flip out at her and assured me that, 'no, really, those words made sense and weren't horrible, keep them in' more than she needed to.
~My Lauren, who I haven't talked to in ages, and I will love eternally- and not just because she came through for me when I had a complete panic at the very last minute and realized that I was missing a scene and had absolutely no creativity left to come up with one. She totally saved me from giving up and having a meltdown in that very final hour.

All flaws in the story are my own, and no fault of anyone who gave me any beta-y advice. I'm just bad at budging once I've written something.

And now, I'll leave you with the monster that this thing became. I hope you enjoy.

[poster by the absolutely amazing Kristi]

It is possible that being in this room, with these men and their watchful daemons, is foolish. Surrounded by evidence all aiming to catch a cannibal, tensions high, daemon strengths matched based on superficial judgments... and yet, Hannibal feels a certain thrill run through him, pride and amusement, a wolf that's fooled the shepherd.

He listens as Jack explains the details of the case; explains the confessions that are rolling in; the complications that have arisen. In his peripheral vision, he can see Velia, sitting primly next to the door, taking in the room at large for him while he's busy blending in- serving Jack's purposes. Evaluating this Will Graham that Jack is so interested in, who is seated at the desk and showing no inclination to even look at the board Jack can't quit studying. He's a quiet man, tense, and Hannibal has already started ticking through ideas on how to draw this man out.

Hannibal isn't expecting him to hiss out the harsh “tasteless” that he does when Jack refers to the leaking of information regarding the case. He glances toward Velia, who flicks her tail when their eyes meet, acknowledging her own surprise quietly to him in a way he knows the others won't pick up on. He answers without hesitation, however, asking the the man if he has trouble with taste.

He feels Will's response curling around something inside of him as it leaves his mouth, “My thoughts are often tasteless.”

If Hannibal could savor words like a meal, he knows that he would savor those. Little does he expect for how long and in how many ways, but even within the moment, he is pleased.

Instead of letting on to the fact, he slides into the role Jack has called him in for, steering the conversation down a path he can begin to gather data from. He can almost hear Velia's eyeroll at his obvious tactic, but chooses to ignore her, “Nor mine. No effective barriers.”

He's let down with the simple fort explanation he gets in response, and the way the man bats away his next attempt, dismissing the suggestion that forts aren't enough without hesitation. He sits beside Will, glancing down at the coyote now between their feet. She's tense, teeth almost bared, glaring at him- catching his eye as soon as he looks toward her and calling attention to something else Hannibal can work with.

“Not fond of eye contact, are you?” he asks, making no effort to catch Will's eyes. He can see Jack hovering by the wall, feigning disinterest in the conversation by studying his scenes, but Hannibal knows that Jack is hanging on to every word. He wouldn't have asked Hannibal here if he weren't intending to do so.

Will almost glances his way before responding, but instead catches his daemon's gaze, holding it steadily for a long moment before he answers, “Eyes are distracting. You see too much, you don't see enough. And- and it's hard to focus when you're thinking, um, 'are whites are really white?' or 'he must have hepatitis' or 'oh, is that a burst vein?'. So, yeah, I try to avoid eyes whenever possible. Jack?”

Hannibal takes a moment, just long enough to allow Jack to wander over, clearly readying himself for whatever Will is about to reveal. He wishes Velia was seated where he could see her, because he wonders just what her reaction to the man's outburst was- the way he slowly moved his eyes from his daemon's to Hannibal's face. Hannibal wonders if it was his body betraying him or if it was a defiant sort of 'see how well you can fake it if you want to' move.

People rarely take Hannibal by surprise, but this one...

Hannibal has no desire to let either Will or Jack change up the conversation, but he can tell that both are about to move it toward something Will's more comfortable with, and that? That just will not do.

“I Imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.”

The daemon between their feet growls, and Hannibal feels the delight roll up his spine, can feel Velia resisting both the urges to laugh and growl back.

“Whose profile are you working on? Whose profile is he working on?” Will demands, bristling and frowning at Jack.

Hannibal still isn't ready for Jack to take over, however, so he responds with something he hopes will infuriate the man further, a blasé explanation that he cannot help making observations.

It's all he can do not to grin when the man responds angrily, making a point to call out the psychoanalysis and his qualifications for calling them out in the first place, and then leaves. His daemon storms out ahead of him, growling and tense in all the ways Hannibal knows Will is pretending he isn't, for all that he's showing his frustration with the situation.

Hannibal ponders the man for a moment, ignoring whatever Jack is saying, instead glancing at Velia to comment on his revelation, “What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine, and maybe some other points of view that scare him.”

Jack makes a soft noise of acknowledgment, and Hannibal turns back to him, pretending his commentary had been for his benefit, even though he knows that the man sitting across from him has no clue what do do with that information, what it means for anyone, let alone what Hannibal and Velia could do with a gift like that...

“It's an uncomfortable gift, Jack. Perception's a tool that's pointed on both ends. This cannibal you have him getting to know... I think I can help good Will see his face.”

Velia turns her face at that, and Hannibal barely contains a grin.

“Please,” Velia groans, rolling her eyes, “They were useless. The daemon alone, ugh. You can't honestly be thinking- is that why you were so chatty? Usually you make me do the heavy lifting.”

“Do not be preposterous. I was merely working. Useless? Useless seems like a rather harsh judgment after only one meeting, especially for these two, Velia.”

Velia huffs, “Useless seems like a rather appropriate judgment after only one meeting, especially for these two, Hannibal. The man was almost jittery, rude, short, defensive. And the coyote, all it did was growl and bristle! Hardly an impressive impression.”

“Yes, yes, so it is clear that socialization has not been a high priority to either of them. However, looking beyond that, Velia, to the empathy Will possesses, you could not have missed that; think of what we could do with that.”

“We couldn't do much with it, given the state it's in,” she responds, tail flicking against his leg.

Hannibal shakes his head, “It is unrefined, certainly. I cannot help but think, though... what if it is refined? What if he is using it to let us see what he wants us to see? This man, he does not want to be figured out, so he is using the tools he has to manipulate the world.”

“Hannibal,” Velia interrupts, voice dripping with disdain. She jumps onto the desk, landing on his notebook to demand his attention, “Do not tell me that you're comparing these... children to us.”

“Nothing of the sort-”

“Everything of the sort.”

“Just that it is a technique we are both quite familiar with, Velia. It would be a shame to be fooled by it.”

He watches her eyes flash in annoyance, and she huffs a breath of disbelief at him, much as she always does when he implies she's being dense. He merely raises an eyebrow, then obviously tracks her as she jumps up and stalks to pout in the bookshelves.

When she's out of sight, he taps his pen lightly against the address he'd obtained before leaving Jack's office, considering the events of the day.

Hannibal arrives at the house early, having decided that arriving unannounced will yield the best results. He reaches for his bag and heads to the door, winking jovially at Velia, who merely laughs at him as she follows. She stretches a bit, allowing herself a moment of looseness before this visit. She's not looking forward to the day, of that she has made herself more than clear. She thinks they're wasting their time with Graham, but Hannibal thinks, perhaps, that just this once she's incorrect.

As Will opens the door, face guarded, almost annoyed, Hannibal allows the hint of a smile to play along his face, greeting the man. He's disappointed when Will responds with an inquiry about Crawford- he's still not entirely sure, after all, if the rude demeanor is a reflection of who Will is or a reflection of who Hannibal does not want him to be, and that bothers him. He relays Crawford's earlier message and repeats himself, not getting an answer as Will chooses instead to walk away. His daemon growls, low and deep, hidden in the shadows of the house, of which there are plenty.

Will doesn't pay attention to him- and hasn't even glanced at Velia yet-, not obviously anyway, as he sets his bag down and pulls out his containers. He does hope that Will will see fit to join him for breakfast; Hannibal thinks it's only fitting, since the girl did die for him,

after all. When he gestures to the seat across from him, there's a slight hesitation before he sits. Almost immediately, his coyote is at his feet, curling around them and growling at Hannibal.

“Brina,” Will says, quietly and sternly, and the growling stops.

He explains away his meal, eggs and sausage, sliding two bowls across the table and setting one beside himself for Velia. She jumps onto the table without hesitation- it creaks ominously, but doesn't seem as though it will break- and Hannibal watches as Will clearly tries to decide if he wants to say something. He doesn't, and Hannibal is pleased. Perhaps he's right, after all, and the rudeness is merely a reflection of what he doesn't want Will to be, is a defense Will's using against him.

Will compliments the meal, and Hannibal smiles. He doesn't need to look down to see that the bowl Will's sat in the floor for his coyote- for Brina- hasn't been touched.

Hannibal debates briefly with himself, deciding on a course of action that will hopefully prove useful, if his judgments about Will are correct. If Velia is correct, then it will probably go poorly, but he's sure he can recover and salvage the day either way, so he steers the conversation toward the uncomfortable meeting the other day.

“I would apologize for my analytical ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you'll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly.”

He's not sure what he expects- Will to wave off the incident? Will to inquire about his assumption that they'll be seeing more of each other?- but he can tell by the tail flick against his wrist that Velia certainly expected Will's quick, sharp, “Just keep it professional.”

“Or,” Hannibal suggests, suddenly determined to prove Velia wrong, competitive in a way that he usually isn't against her, “we could socialize like adults. God forbid we become friendly.”

Brina growls again from the floor, and Hannibal would roll his eyes if he were a man of such habits.

Will responds with an almost flippant, “I don't find you that interesting.”

Before Velia can gloat at him, Hannibal responds as sincerely as he can, and then changes the conversation, “You will. Agent Crawford tells me you have a knack for the monsters.”

Will looks across the table at him, and Hannibal catches glimpse of Brina moving to lean against Will's legs. “I don't think the Shrike killed that girl in the field.”

Velia's head barely twitches, and Hannibal is pleased to see that she's listening as intently as he is. He doesn't disagree, instead prompts, “The devil is in the details. What didn't your copycat do to the girl in the field? What gave it away?”

For the slightest moment, he's almost concerned that his phrasing will give him away, but it's a fleeting fear and he knows that there's no reason for Will to suspect him.

“Everything!” Will sounds frustrated, almost desperate, “It's like he had to show me a negative so that I could see the positive. That crime scene was practically gift-wrapped.”

Hannibal is lucky that his body is so well adjusted to going through motions and convincing people that his reactions are normal. He's aware that he's making an almost confused face, that he's glancing at Velia, registering some degree of doubt that anyone would gift wrap a scene... but the glance at Velia is really to watch as she gives in that Hannibal is perhaps the one right here, there's much more to Will Graham- and perhaps even his daemon, certainly his daemon if there's as much as Hannibal expects to Will- than Velia had first suspected.

“The mathematics of human behavior, all those ugly variables. Some bad math with this Shrike fellow, huh? Are you reconstructing his fantasies? What kind of problems does he have?”

Will lets out the lightest laugh, helping himself to the coffee Hannibal has brought, “Oh, he has a few.”

Hannibal decides to prod, just enough to see what sort of defenses Will will call up, “You ever have any problems, Will?”

The lie is written across his face, and he doesn't even bother to call up defenses, just lies blatantly, “No.”

Pleased by this turn, Hannibal grants him a reprieve, “Of course you don't. You and I are just alike-” Velia scoffs at that, quietly enough for Hannibal's ears, but he doesn't think it reached the coyote, and certainly not Will “-problem-free. Nothing about us to feel horrible about.”

He waits a beat, and upon not getting called out on the lie himself, he adopts a mocking tone and decides to see how Will responds to a different tactic.

“You know, Will? I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little teacup. The finest China, used only for special guests.”

Will laughs, and Hannibal is delighted, allows himself to laugh along, delighted even more as Will asks, “How do you see me?”

He answers honestly, “The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.”

He adds the expression on Will's face to the menu, alongside Will's tasteless thoughts, and wonders if maybe he hasn't gotten himself into something he could never have expected.

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Will is eight when Brina chooses to settle into her coyote form for good. Will isn’t overly surprised, she’s been favoring it for a while now, and when she does change, she cycles through a small handful rather quickly. He knows that it’s early, that his classmates haven’t even entertained the idea of their daemons settling and probably won’t think about it for a couple of years.

It takes his classmates roughly a week to realize that Brina's settled, because he certainly doesn't volunteer the information. He's not sure why, he isn't embarrassed by it, but he feels like letting the others know won't be a particularly good idea, even if he can't quite articulate why.

But, as it turns out, Bobby Jackson whispers to him in the middle of math, asking him why Brina hasn't changed, and it turns out "what'd she do, settle or somethin'?" is a sarcastic jab at him that he doesn't quite pick up on, so he nods in response instead of ignoring it. And that's how the whole class finds out, because Bobby immediately raises his hand to ask the teacher if there's something wrong with Will and can his Cissa catch it and can he please be moved away 'cause if he brings home some daemon bug and gets his whole family sick his mom's going to be really mad at him.

Despite Mrs. Mulligan's reassurances that Brina isn't sick and neither is Will, and that sometimes daemons are just ready at earlier times than others, everyone still leans as far away from him as they can get in their seats. After school, when the bell has rang and everyone's run off to catch their buses, she holds him behind for a few moments to ask him if everything's okay at school. He may not be some daemon expert, but he knows enough to know that even if his dad *was* beating him, it wouldn't affect Brina's settling. If anything, it'd probably make her a bit more skittish and weary of settling. He doesn't say that, though, just assures her that everything is fine and runs off to catch his bus before it pulls off.

It takes about a week before kids stop avoiding him and pulling their daemons physically away from him. Instead, they start laughing at him and talking loudly about a cool new form theirs took, and the other daemons start changing as often as possible, showy and flashy, a different form every time he or Brina look at them. They make sure to talk about him in voices as loud as they can go and still be called a whisper, and words like freak and reject float around him in an almost palpable form.

He thinks all that cruelty must be exhausting.

He lasts another week before he breaks- skips the bus ride home on Friday to run as fast as he can away from the school and toward his house. It takes him an hour and a half to get home, but Dad's at Miss Janie's house, working on her houseboat, so it's not like anyone's around to notice. He presses himself into his bed, balling himself up as little as he can, and cries until there's no sound left to come out.

Brina waits for the worst of it to pass before she wraps herself around him, nuzzling and licking and whispering that she's sorry.

That gets his attention, and he pulls himself together long enough to tell her, as fiercely as any eight year old has ever managed, that she should never, ever apologize for who she is, because he loves her more than anything in this world, and who gives a damn what stupid Bobby Jackson thinks.

Hannibal Lecter is fifteen before Velia decides that she prefers the leopard to the other four forms she's been trying on for size for the past three years. He is pleased, because although

he was fond of all of them, the leopard is much more practical than the grizzly bear, raises far fewer questions than the rattlesnake, is far more elegant than the alligator, and presents a more intense figure than the lioness. He tells her so, and she scoffs at him, chastising him for thinking that she didn't already know. She does make sure that he knows his opinion didn't really have any weight in the decision, though, naturally.

He is pleased, to say the least.

His classmates have long since learned to keep their opinions of Hannibal and his often changing daemon to themselves, as they have long since learned that Hannibal and his often changing daemon do not mind to lash out and make them bleed, taking their revenge for each word said against them, despite their teachers' interventions. Many of Hannibal's classmates, he knows, often wonder if Hannibal doesn't intimidate the teachers as well.

He himself had no problem with the time Velia took to settle herself down. He had asked her, once, a couple of years ago when his was the last non-settled daemon in his class, why he was so insistent on not growing up. He'd glared the teacher into silence, naturally, but had later asked Velia what her hesitation was.

She had informed him, quietly and sadly, that they had both done enough growing up in their lives, and after that, he had embraced her decision even more fully. Whatever made her happy made him happy, after all.

Hannibal does love that she's settled, however, in a way he's sure she catches onto but neither of them ever vocalize. His life seems to have been an ever-changing thing until this point, with the only constant being Velia, who is now an even more reliable constant. He does not realize this until she settles and he finds himself waking up day after day to her silky fur and her dark eyes, always the same, always watching over him.

Her settling also brings him a certain amount of respect from his classmates that he never realized was lacking in the first place, layered underneath the uneasiness they feel toward him, and it is at that point that Hannibal realizes he likes that respect, likes the power that it gives him when coupled with those insecurities they have in his presence. It is then that Hannibal realizes he will do whatever it takes to be completely in control of his life from then on out, every aspect, every detail.

When Velia settles, she not only chooses her form, but sets Hannibal on a path toward his own.

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He enters through the back window, having cut the screen out. It is summer time; even the nights are heavy and muggy, oppressive with heat. The Halls are not a wealthy family, and with three kids to raise, they have little money for luxuries such as air conditioning. Those children are away tonight, he is certain of that. He doesn't even go upstairs to their rooms, instead focusing immediately on the master bedroom at the bottom of the stairs, not the largest bedroom in the house, a room not even initially designed to be a bedroom, but made that way when necessity called for another bedroom. The location, he thinks, will be good

when the children reach their teens. Would be good, anyway, if the Halls were going to live to see their children reach their teens. They will not.

But that is not important. The task at hand is all that matters.

He lets his daemon lead the way, knowing that she will be far more efficient than he himself at detecting what's going on in the room. She leads the way, shedding a couple of coppery hairs as she does, until she is right outside of their doorway.

Inside, they can both smell the remnants of the evening: sweat and sex and alcohol. He has no doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Hall have been taking advantage of a rare night alone, without the responsibilities of parenting. His daemon leads the way, pushing the door open with her nose, and he thinks that if they were to somehow make it through this night, they would never leave their door cracked again. The ceiling fan covers any noise that the door may make, and no one stirs.

They strike at the same time, daemon and man working as one well oiled killing machine, taking Cynthia Hall and her pug out. They feel no pain, their death is quick. It is the only courtesy that will be given here tonight.

The death of his wife wakes Michael Hall, and before his otter can react, his own daemon takes care of her. The scuffle leaves more copper hairs on the floor, both in the blood now staining it and on the parts that somehow avoid it. She is a fox, clever and quick and vicious in her attacking. Relentless.

He incapacitates Michael, a choke hold, the man frantic as he thrashes around, trying his best to overcome... but he is stronger than Michael and manages to subdue him.

While Mr. Hall is unconscious, he begins laying out the scene.

The man is first tied to the bed, though not with typical restraints in a home invasion- with the sort of restraints one would find in a sex store. The woman on the bed next to him has never touched these restraints before, although forensics will later discover that this is not Michael's first time encountering them.

Next, pictures of his children are propped in front of him, along the footboard of the bed. These are not photos he has gotten from the house, though. These are photos he has taken himself, having watched the children at a nearby playground. These pictures were taken to show Michael just how much care, how much thought, has been put into this invasion. This man will die wondering if his children are next.

He is careless, or perhaps just carefree, touching as much as he wants, running his hand along the man's thighs, mouthing at his privates, feeling his way across his chest. This scene is no use until the man wakes up, but that does not mean he has to be bored while he waits. He is not a criminal mastermind, or perhaps he just doesn't care if he leaves behind all the evidence they need to catch him.

When Michael awakes, a ball gag is forced into his mouth, and he takes his time killing Mr. Hall.

This is not a random act, and this is not revenge. This is love. Mrs. Hall's only sin was loving Mr. Hall, but Mr. Hall? Well, it's easy to surmise that Michael is the real target.

This is his design. Michael Hall is his.

"He made sure to show the man everything," Will says, eyes still pressed tightly. As soon as he speaks, Brina winds her way in between his legs, whining, "He made sure to show him everything he had... it was everything he had chosen. We're looking for a past lover, or maybe... maybe even a current lover? Male, also... probably angry that Mr. Hall wouldn't leave his wife for him? His daemon is a fox, the hairs in the hall, by the bed. The nose print on the door there, that's not a pug nose; there should be plenty of evidence here, solid forensic evidence. Now that we know where to start, you shouldn't have any trouble."

He shudders, glad that the horrors of Mr. Hall's body are chasing away the quiet hum of arousal that had been building as he saw this scene play out, the way the killer enjoyed himself throughout all of this. He doesn't meet anyone's eyes, doesn't even look toward their faces, as he excuses himself from the scene, getting outside so that he can take large gulps of the humid air.

Somewhere, three children are huddled together, crying. They will never see their parents again, and one will always remember their parents as they were this morning when she was dropped off by her best friend's mother after a slumber party. Somewhere, three lives have broken, and three children will now grow up completely different than they were meant to, their potentials snuffed out as violently as their parents' lives... and Will is trying not to vomit at the memory of the murder he just worked through, at the way he can still feel Michael Hall's inner thighs under his hands, despite never having touched them, and at the way he had marveled in the moment at the unexpectedly erotic image the man had-

-Brina's head butts into him, painful against his shin, and she nips at his calf muscle. He lowers himself to the ground, leaning against her, murmuring so that only she can hear him, "Thanks."

She shakes her head, "It's not easy, I get that, you know."

He raises an eyebrow at her, reaches over and smoothes his hand along her ears, "No. I know."

"And it's not real, either. I think... I think we need to work on *you* getting that."

His startled laugh is too high, would sound forced if it hadn't been shocked out of him by such a sharp observation. Usually, after scenes like this, Brina's gentler and subtler about things.

"I could still smell it, you know?" she continues, "Her excitement at doing it, at taking the pug's life, taking the otter's life. The otter really should have been more of a struggle, so that was the real excitement. It was the sort of high she'd never felt before, you could tell- but the thing is, you have to hold on to that 'she'- you have to remember that it's 'she' and not 'you'-"

“Since when’d you become a shrink?” he asks, scowling a bit at her.

“Since you started going crazy,” she answers, flippant and mocking, just as hatefully, even as she lowers herself to rest her head on his lap.

“Yeah,” he says. “That makes sense.”

Later on that night- or maybe early the next morning, he’s not quite clear on it-, when he wakes up sweating and crying, she leads him to the living room, gently butting her head against the back of his legs until he cooperates. Once he’s there, she arranges him on the floor, nabbing a blanket from the couch to go under him and a pulling a pillow from his bed for him to use. Once she has him where she wants him, she calls out for the pack to join them, and the seven of them curl up against him, warm and alive and his.

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When the authorities find Hannibal, days after the incident, he is miles away from his family’s hunting lodge. He is starving and freezing and underdressed and when the rescuers drop to their knees to engulf him in their arms, Velia lashes out- using the last of her energy to cycle through the fiercest forms she knows-, striking and hissing and growling and roaring. Hannibal shoves at their arms, trying to escape, sobbing and trembling, falling back against his daemon. He isn’t even sure if he is alive, if these are men or angels or demons, or just feverish dreams taunting him. Perhaps a mixture of all of these things?

It takes three other daemons to hold Velia back, even in her weakened state her panic is giving her strength, and once they’ve subdued her, Hannibal immediately collapses into the rescuers arms, giving up, letting them carry him toward the vehicles they have waiting.

Hannibal doesn’t speak for weeks- months- afterward. He doesn’t even change his expression, always disinterested and unaffected. He lets Velia communicate for him- and while she tends to stick toward animalistic noises rather than speaking, she gets their points across. He hears the adults in charge whispering about brain damage, about how he must be mute, trauma and stress caused by whatever he witnessed, by the dehydration and starvation. He hears them asking about Mischa, wondering aloud to one another, even though they’ve learned that it’s dangerous to mention her to him.

The nights are the worst for him, wrapping himself as tightly in his blanket as he can, hiding his face in Velia’s body and trembling as he’s bombarded with the memories he works so hard to suppress during his waking hours. In turn, Velia presses her own head against him, whispering her reassurances so that only he can hear- she’s here, she’s got him, no one is going to hurt them.

And in the morning, as he wipes the damning evidence of his nightmares out of his eyes and scrubs away tear tracks, she hides him from the others, waiting until his shields are ready.

Will’s known that he wasn’t like the other kids for years, really- since he started school, even. He can tick off all the things that are wrong on his fingers, if you ask him. He’s smaller than

the other kids; his mom isn't around and his dad works longer hours than the other dads; his daemon settled earlier than the other kids'; he doesn't like making eye contact; he doesn't like touching; he gets so overwhelmed by all of the other kids around him. It's not some big secret, really. He totally gets that he's not like the other kids.

It means that he spends a lot of time trying to avoid everyone, though, because when you've got that many things working against you, it means you get picked on a lot. It's mostly thanks to Brina that Will doesn't have a constant black eye- she's got excellent timing at dodging between him and the other kids, knowing when to bare her teeth and let out her lowest growls. The other kids may hate him and mock him and tease him, but the other daemons are almost horrified of Brina.

Afterwards, when she's scared them away and they're safely tucked into the backseat of the bus or hidden in the furthest bathroom stall or curled up on Mrs. Remetti's couch waiting on his father to get home, she'll curl around him, resting her head on his lap while he leans his back against her body. She'll whisper promises about how one day things will be better- he'll grow up and they'll go to college and then they'll get a job and a house- none of those stupid kids will matter anyway. Will always buries his face against her and just breathes, comforted by the fact that everything there is his, and all of her words are for him, and she'll never let anything happen to him.

==========

Hannibal despises psychiatry. It is a useless practice, filled with self absorbed people spewing nonsense to someone who pretends to care before pretending that there's nothing wrong that can't be fixed by some high priced pharmaceuticals and some extra exorbitantly priced sessions. The ones who would most benefit from the practice, if it were something one could benefit from, are the ones who would never willingly step foot into a psychiatrist's office, the ones who know what a complete waste of time it is. Hannibal knows this, because he's one of those people.

He only became a psychiatrist, only started seeing one himself, because Velia assured him that it was the best thing to do to fit in within the world he finds himself living in.

He would have much preferred to stay a surgeon, getting his hands dirty and exploring all that the human body had to offer- which is precisely why Velia scolds him away from it every time he laments on the situation. It's too obvious, she argues, and doctors are so often under the scrutiny of the law whenever a well carved body happens to be found. She'd also been quick to point out that if he kept to a strict code in which his patients were off limits, it would put him even further outside of the scope of the law. It's true, he will readily admit it, but that doesn't make him any fonder of his current profession. If anything, in his lesser moments, he's more frustrated by it because of that code.

Case in point:

Franklyn is, once again, sobbing across from him. This time, he's brought a handkerchief. It's for the best, considering that last time he'd started crying only to discover that Hannibal had somehow been out of tissues. It was, after all, his secretary's job before she flitted off to Europe. As far as Hannibal has been able to discern, the tears are largely due to the

abandonment issues that Hannibal has stirred up within Franklyn after rescheduling his last appointment so that he could accompany Will to a crime scene in what he pretended was both an effort to placate the lovely Ms. Bloom and the overbearing Agent Crawford. Really, he'd been quite curious to see more of Will's process at a scene, rather than after a scene. The choice between Will at work and Franklyn had been laughably easy.

It had, of course, been much more interesting than listening to Franklyn prattle on about the friends he thought he had and the ways in which they were slighting him by either being imaginary or unaware of this friendship he'd formed with them.

Of course, he's not entirely sure that his abandonment is the cause today, as Franklyn hasn't said a word since he sat down. Before he sat down, he'd merely thanked Hannibal for 'finally being able' to schedule him in, and from there Hannibal had been left to make an educated guess on the tears.

Hannibal merely settles in, displaying every sign of attentive patience, even while he begins cataloguing the things he needs to attend to in the upcoming days. He can't even share exasperated looks with Velia, as she is hidden in the bookshelves, as she does the instant Franklyn and his duck come into the room. Franklyn's uncomfortably fascinated with her, and the urge to terrorize his dimwitted daemon is a little too strong for Velia to resist all the time.

The entire session passes with Franklyn subjecting Hannibal to this, which he can only assume is punishment. When his time is up, Hannibal stands and smiles politely congratulating him on the progress they've made. Franklyn is confused as he leaves, but Hannibal just nods and gently shoos him out the door.

"I can't decide if that was more or less tedious than having to listen to him talk the whole time," Velia sighs, jumping down to land on his desk. Hannibal lets himself laugh a bit, shaking his head as he moves around to prepare for his next appointment.

After Franklyn, it is time for Mrs. Perotti's mental breakdown. Mrs. Perotti- Elizabeth, although she loathes being called that- is a lady that rivals Franklyn for dramatics. She's been seeing Hannibal for a year and a half now, and each session begins with her diagnosing herself with a new problem.

Today, she is sobbing about how her mother never loved her and her father used to beat her and she's pretty sure that's why she's contemplating running away from her husband, not saying a word before she packs up and just leaves him, even though he loves her. Hannibal placates her a bit, reassures her that her feelings are normal. He listens to her reasoning and very carefully doesn't try to talk her either into or out of running away from her familial obligations.

Velia is present for that session, curled near his feet in a position they've discovered puts most of the patients at ease for some reason. She flicks her tail against his ankle, out of sight, at the more tedious parts of the breakdown, shifts slightly against him in favor of laughing, and makes everything a little bit more bearable.

Normally, after Mrs. Perotti's sessions, Hannibal has a bit of a reprieve: just phone calls and correspondences to attend to. He's just settling down to do that when a knock comes at the patient's exit. He shares a look of frustration with Velia before settling his mask in place and moving to open the door.

The scathing greeting he is prepared to deliver fails to come out as he opens the door to reveal Will, leaning against the wall.

"You're free right now, right?" His eyes are bloodshot and Hannibal's willing to bet he hasn't slept well in days.

"For you, Will, always," Hannibal replies, not examining the truth to that statement, opening the door wider for him to stumble his way into the office. Brina follows him, just as tired, and doesn't even pause to glare suspiciously at Hannibal like she usually does. He counts it as a sign of just how exhausted the two must be.

As he closes the door, he spares a moment to wonder at the fact that the mere appearance of Will has just improved his day infinitely. When he catches Velia's eye, he can tell she's marveling at the same thing. He turns before she can call attention to it, however.

Having decided it's best not to dwell on it, he follows after Will, getting to the business of prodding him lightly with openers until Will decides he's ready to talk about the way he keeps waking up to the feel of Michael Hall's throat in his hands.

==========

The first time Will manages to convince a girl to go on a date with him, he's in the eleventh grade. She's new enough to the school that she's not quite aware of just how much of a social outcast he is, and he somehow manages not to seem like too much of a freak when he asks her. Despite all of that, he's still convinced it's nothing short of a miracle when she beams at him and accepts the invitation. Unfortunately, it ends in a bit of a fiasco, and it's also the last time in high school that someone agrees to a date with him.

She doesn't pick up on the fact that, while Will really likes her and thinks she's lovely, he's really not overly comfortable with touching. She rubs his leg throughout the entirety of the movie, and when she goes to rub a bit higher than he's comfortable with (not that he was comfortable with the leg in general, but he convinces himself that it's normal, which he desperately wants to be at that point in his life) he can feel the panic bubble up in his chest.

Brina chooses that moment to nip at the tail of the girl's squirrel, sending it in a panic up the girl's leg and onto her shoulder. She leaves in a huff, and Brina jumps onto her now abandoned seat and leans apologetically into Will for the remainder of the movie. He feels like maybe he should be frustrated at her, but he can't really manage anything other than relief.

He never really gets better at dating girls. A bit, sure, as he comes to terms with other people in his space and touching him. He even has days where the press of breasts against him while he licks his way into a girl's mouth is the best feeling in the world. Guys are easier, though. He has much different taste in guys than he does in girls- guys with daemons who roll their

eyes at Brina when she growls while he works through his discomfort at casual touches or forceful kisses or the way he never really gets used to that whole adjustment thing. Guys are definitely easier than girls, though, even if Brina complains loudly about their daemons as soon as they've left the room.

Needless to say, though, dating isn't easy. He sticks to friends with benefits, mostly, when he finds someone that understands his hang ups and can stand his quirks long enough to spend the evening together.

Hannibal doesn't really understand dating, nor the need to. Velia's scolded him a million times over about the need to fit in, to blend into society- and while he does a positively superb job at it in general, dating just isn't on his list of important ways to do so. Most of the work surrounding the tedious process falls to Velia, as such. She rolls her eyes and complains at him, but Velia does the seducing when Hannibal gets the urge to give into more primal needs.

It's not that she's better at flirting than he is- because when he puts his mind to it and does so, just to show her that it's not that he's incompetent, he's far smoother than she, manages it in far less time-, it's just that he so rarely has the patience to waste on wooing the sort of people he enjoys bringing home. That time would be better spent on his studies, and he often finds his mind straying to them as he attempts to court them.

So Velia coos at their daemons and bats her eyelashes and purrs just the right nothings at them until they're, intentionally or not, steering their humans toward Hannibal. At which point, Velia head butts him in the leg and reminds him that it's his turn to play the part.

Hannibal is by no means a slouch when it comes to romance. He's remarkably skilled at knowing just what to say and when, and his tastes do lend themselves to what others consider romantic. It's just a matter of remembering to keep the façade of caring up long enough to get them home and into his bed. He doesn't care much for relationships, a fact which Velia is more than pleased with. She'd be exhausted if she had to keep the act up for too long.

The bright side is, between her charming their daemons and his memorable dates and his not inconsiderable skills in the bedroom, they don't have too much work to do when they decide to revisit past flings. It is quite helpful.

==========

Will wakes up slowly, trying to figure out why he feels out of place. When he opens his eyes, trying to breathe through the pain that the light sends shooting through his head, he takes note of the bland walls and sparsely decorated room. He closes them quickly, and takes a moment to breathe deeply- not only to combat the headache and nausea, but also to deal with the panic surging it's way up toward his throat. Waking up in the hospital doesn't ever really bode well. He tracks his way through the last memories he can work up and finds that it doesn't help at all. Trip to the grocery store… pouring the dog food into the storage container… heading out back to let the dogs romp… passing around treats when everyone came in…

Nothing about that reads hospital visit to him.

He's pretty sure that the loss of time stresses him out more than the very fact that he's in the hospital itself. He reaches over, eyes still pressed closed, and feels along his side, then startles a bit- eyes flying open, fluorescents and headaches aside. Every single time Will has ever woken up in the hospital- and there have been more of those than he wants- he's woken to Brina curled up just to his side- not touching, but close enough to touch. He quickly revises the levels of stress the hospital and time loss are causing him- they're absolutely nothing compared to the stress of waking up without Brina within arm's reach.

He finds her within seconds of opening his eyes- seconds that may as well be hours. She's curled up at his feet, bandaged quite a bit. It takes him far longer than it should to realize she's still breathing, to realize she has to be still breathing because he can still feel her connection, to realize that she's alive. He almost reaches for her, but the motion's given up on as soon as he thinks about it; his body is screaming it's protest at even considering such a move.

"It will be a bit before you find yourself comfortable moving," Velia says from somewhere nearby, voice quiet and soothing, gentle in a way he's noticed she rarely is with others.

He looks around and spots her, curled up on the small table beside the armchair holding Hannibal, who seems to be sleeping rather soundly, despite the discomfort he must be feeling.

Before he can get his brain to function enough for an actual sentence, Velia continues, "Brina is fine, Will. Sore, scratched up a bit, but I assure you that she is well."

He relaxes a bit, groans even as he sighs as that little bit of movement burns its way through him.

"I don't…" he manages, "I don't know what happened."

Velia flicks her tail a bit, jumps gently over onto the edge of the bed, "What *do* you remember, Will?"

Will frowns, can feel his brow furrowing, and after a moment to think it over, he replies, "We were just… we just let the dogs out. Maxwell usually wanders off, but he didn't… everyone came in, and I locked up, and that's… I don't remember what happened. I locked up, and there were treats, and just… I don't. I don't know what happened."

Velia cocks her head, ear flicking in a way he's come to understand means she is unimpressed with everything. "Think, Will. I am sure you remember something. The only question is whether you think you are strong enough to let yourself?"

He closes his eyes, pressing his lips together in an attempt not to scream at her. Sometimes she frustrates him even more than Hannibal does. It doesn't even matter that their stupid tactics work, it all annoys him anyway.

As he's opening his eyes, preparing to glare at her and tell her just how she can fuck herself, there's a moment- a flash- glinting silver against silver against the back of his eyelids. He

pauses- eyes partially open, mouth slightly parted, breath caught up in his chest. A flash, glinting silver against silver, like a…

What was it. He can't…

"There was a knife. I had a knife?" he says quietly.

He feels Velia nod, "You were found with a knife."

He glances at her, then down at his hands, and startles to find them covered in blood- but it's not nearly as startling as when he looks up. He's lying in a bed still, but not the hospital bed, or even his bed. The ceiling fan swings lazily around, and when he turns his head he finds himself facing the back of a blonde head.

It's a shame, really, that Michael forced this onto Cynthia. She's really quite lovely. Fantastic figure, gorgeous hair, and what little he saw of her eyes were bright and vibrant. It's not his fault she's laying there, really, spark snuffed out. Michael did this. This is Michael's fault.

He turns and looks at Michael; Michael, who is finally gone, eyes closed, and there's such a thrill to it- he rises from the bed, hovering over him one last time to run a hand against his cheek.

From there he makes his way toward the bathroom. His canine trails along with him, and as he looks down toward his fox, he startles to find a coyote- he startles, and he finds himself back in a hospital bed, Brina at his feet while Hannibal still sleeps beside him and Velia watches him intently, tail flicking fast.

"I went back," he breathes out, "I went back to the scene?"

She inclines her head in a nod, "Why, Will?"

He wonders that himself, but finds himself answering without really meaning to, "It didn't add up. This was… this wasn't a first kill. He didn't spook, not once in the whole thing- four lives, and neither he nor his fox spooked… and Hall would have put up a fight, did struggle… but all the evidence left behind, that's an amateur move."

"The scene is clean now, Will," Velia responds, "What would going back do for you?"

He can feel himself worrying his lip as he tries not to get caught up again, tries to focus on all the tricks Hannibal has suggested for when he finds himself unsure of who he is or where he is or what he is. "It doesn't matter. Once I've got it, it doesn't matter if they've cleaned it. Being there helps me see how things played out, where he might have gone and what he might have done. Something we might have missed in the first run through."

"And did it?"

"I got lost. I got- it wasn't his first kill, but it was the first one he felt passionately about, because he got lost himself. He let himself go fully into it." Will brings his hands up to scrub over his face, "He went to the bathroom- we went to the bathroom, and I remember, I was in the mirror, but I was him? I wasn't--- we looked in the mirror, and I could head Brina talking

but I didn't know who she was. She wasn't his fox; I was too far…" His voice trails off as he starts to get lost again, in nothing but the memory of it.

He startles as he feels something brush against his hand, and isn't sure how to take it when he realizes that Velia has moved so that her tail flicks his hand as it flicks. Her head tilts, and he tilts his back in acknowledgement, letting his fists uncurl, wondering when he formed them in the first place.

"Tell me, Will," Velia says, her quiet voice carrying to him so loudly that it may well have been a shout.

"There was a mirror, and we were in it. Except, we were raising the knife, and I wasn't… someone was yelling and there were barks and--- fuck." He jerks, looking down toward Brina to reassure himself she's there, "Fuck. He came back; he came back because it meant something- he'd probably never had a scene like that before, and he had to come back, and I was so fucking lost that---"

Velia is shushing him, tail firmly against him now, not bothering to flick, and he settles before he continues, "Brina bit me. That's what got me… she'd thrown his fox against the wall, it was struggling, and he was trying to get a hold on her to---"

"Brina is fine, Will. She is alive, and she is as well as she can be. Just, very tired. The medicine administered is why she is sleeping so deeply."

He nods, continues again, "And Brina had to snap me out of it; she managed to bite me, and I was holding a knife. Did I kill him?"

She inclines her head a bit, considering him, "That's nothing to worry about at the moment. What is important is that you and Velia are both alive and well, Will."

Absently, he drags his hand up her tail a bit, surprised at how soft she is, barely registering the fact that he is petting Hannibal's daemon, at least until Hannibal himself speaks up.

"She is not incorrect, Will. The important thing is that we get Brina and you back to your health. You have given everyone quite a scare, Will."

He turns to look at Hannibal, mildly amused to find that he doesn't look at all like he's just spent who knows how many hours asleep in an uncomfortable arm chair. "How did I get out of there?"

Hannibal quirks his mouth, "Brina howled until the neighbors called the police. They recognized you, called for an ambulance, called for Jack. From what I understand, she insisted they call me, as well. I've been hoping to catch her awake to express my gratitude."

"Why are you here, though?" he asks, frowning, even as his hand still moves gently along Velia's tail.

"You are my friend, Will. More so than my patient. And both are important, are they not?" he replies, "Given your past wanderings, I felt you might not be fully aware of the things you'd

been doing. I felt you waking up confused and lost in a hospital was not for the best, Will."

Will bites his lip, swallowing down the snark he can feel rising, instead settling on, "Thank you, Hannibal."

He's treated to a rare smile, genuine and full. He can't help returning it, even as he feels his eyes begin to close, heavy and safe now.

==========

Velia learned early on in their life that if the two of them were to fit in, she needed to be the one taking the reins in the social situations. Not that she blamed Hannibal, not at all- losing Mischa and Nikolas had nearly killed them both. She knew, though, that if Hannibal didn't fit in, if he didn't blend with the others, that they would send them off to some sort of militant school, and she had not been eager for the trials that they'd read students and their daemons went through at such places.

So she'd prodded and pushed, making him learn to study the other kids, making him learn to control the urge to scream and shove, making him learn to tap those rages down just like Mischa's death had tapped down already.

She'd watched him learn to hold those emotions back, watched him take control of every aspect of his life- however slowly- and she'd breathed easier every time he showed how well he had things under control. And then, in the privacy of just then, she'd prodded and poked, just enough to make sure that she wasn't making him hide away from her as well- there'd been a bit of danger at that, in the beginning, when he'd almost resented her.

And so they went to medical school, and he did so wonderfully. And then he learned to butcher, taking out those men who'd stumbled upon their hunting lodge all those years ago, the men who had taken advantage of his family's kindness, their hospitality: the men who'd taken everything that Hannibal had and destroyed it.

And as Grutas fell, as he had laughed out his ugly confessions, telling Hannibal and Velia how they'd fed them the stew made out of Mischa and Nikolas- Velia had watched as Hannibal died, pieces of him shattering around the boat they'd cornered Grutas on. She'd watched as Lady Murasaki fled them, horrified by her bloodsoaked nephew and the chunks of weasel stuck to Velia's fur, unable to face the fact that they were proud of that kill, stronger for it. She'd watched as Hannibal wavered, and she'd held him up while he thought about falling.

When he'd quit trembling, when he'd regained that control he had come to treasure so much, he'd looked at her and suggested America, and she'd known- then and there- as he said it. They would be okay.

They would make it through this.

They had each other, and nothing more would ever matter.

Brina liked Will's dad. He might not have been around a lot, but when he was, he didn't treat Will poorly. He and Zena treated them well, especially Will. Too many people treated him like he was the wrong sort of special, or a freak, or dumb, and Brina couldn't stand them.

Will, though, just sat quietly through the comments, pretending not to hear- or in some truly horrible cases, understanding their sentiments completely, which always infuriated Brina, made her work to make him see her sentiments instead- and didn't speak up for himself.

"I don't want to cause any more trouble than I already do," he always said, when she'd call him on the silences.

So she worked at focusing on them, focusing on their feelings, keeping hold of them when Will would begin to lose sight of them, so that when he started thinking that way, started apologizing away who he was, she could fuss at him and pull forth all of the things they were feeling, deep down underneath the others' mess.

And it would work.

Will found his voice and learned to speak up in school. He learned to let the bullies words roll off of him and learned to twist them back and throw them in their faces. He learned to ignore the way his aunts and uncles edged his cousins away from them, as if afraid what he had was catching.

==========

Hannibal's grinding meat, generally a relaxing task, and Velia is chattering on about how the local opera is doing Aida, of all things, when they'd been talking about doing Cantredi, when it happens.

"I just think that if you're going to discuss doing something such as that, you should actually commit to it," she's growling.

"You are not incorrect. Also, It appears we have just used the last of the lungs, you might make a note for later," he answers, distracted by the task at hand.

"Oh, but those are my favorite."

"I am aware of that."

"Well, we'll make sure it ends up on the shopping list, then," she laughs.

He smiles up at her, "When you compile that list, you might also add that we are low on liver."

"How in the world are we low on liver?" she laughs. If he weren't distracted, he would know that she doesn't expect an answer, is instead laughing at the rarity of the situation.

Hannibal, though, quickly reviews the dishes it's been used in lately before answering with a simple, "I have used quite a bit of it lately."

She pauses, looking at him intently, as he rarely misses things such as her rhetoric. “It was a rhetorical question, you realize, Hannibal. One that you not only missed, but also answered by sidestepping.”

“Sidestepping?”

“Yes, sidestepping. ‘Used quite a bit of it’ isn’t even an answer.”

“Well, I am given to understand that the question was not even a question, so what does it matter that I’ve not answered it?”

“Hannibal.” Velia’s voice has changed from teasing to curious now, to a tone that he recognizes as the tone he cannot possibly escape.

He would sigh if it wouldn’t give him away, but he doesn’t, “Will has been ill. I have merely been making sure he eats something likely to help his body, rather than the swill the hospital serves.”

Velia opens her mouth to respond, thinks better of it, and closes it, instead choosing to fix him with a pointed look that he in turn ignores.

As he’s cleaning out the grinder, she finally speaks up, “You know, you spend an awful lot of time making sure he’s-”

“Well fed?”

She snorts, inelegantly, jumping down from the counter she’s seated on so that she can rub comfortingly against his legs, “Sure. Well fed. Do you know who else you spend an awful lot of time making sure is well fed?”

He’s knows he won’t appreciate the answer or the direction the conversation is being taken in, so he chooses not to answer, instead rewrapping the remaining meat.

“You spend an awful lot of time making sure I’m well fed. Making sure you’re well fed. Making sure we’re well fed. And that? That is the entire list, Hannibal.”

“Velia-”

“I’m not complaining, Hannibal. I’m not complaining at all. I think it could be…” Velia sighs lightly, knowing that this will frustrate him, “It could be really good for you, Hannibal, letting someone in.”

“Ah, yes, because dearest Will would be quite complacent when it came to my extracurricular activities, the ways in which I choose to bring home the literal bacon, quite happy to don the apron and cook up the waiters and accountants I’ve presented to him.”

“Oh, Hannibal. There’s no way that Will would cook, not when you’re there to do it. That’s just foolish.”

“Velia.” He can feel the way his voice has lowered, losing any and all humor.

“I’m being serious, Hannibal. He’s been kept in the dark this long, what’s to make you think you can’t continue to do so? I’m not telling you to move him and the mutts in, I’m telling you to have fun with him- even more fun than you already are. It’s been a while since we’ve let ourselves care about anyone-”

“Velia-”

“Drop the tone, Hannibal,” Velia snaps, her own voice going as dangerously dark as his. “If you don’t have this discussion with me now, I’ll ask Vernon what book it was his dear Mrs. Peretti was talking about the other day, you know, the one where she was aiming to solve all her marital problems? Something about the power of prayer, I believe.”

He pales a bit, he’s sure of it, at the thought of Velia and Vernon discussing romantic self help and the turns his sessions with Mrs. Peretti would take when she undoubtedly heard about it.

“Exactly. Now, tell me what’s so horrible about this idea, Hannibal. You aren’t disinterested.”

“I am not. However, Will is far too perceptive to miss a fact like that if he were let any closer than he already is. And Will? Would never understand.”

“Do you remember chastising me for underestimating Will and Brina, their powers of perception and understanding?”

He glares at her, “Enough. We have discussed this, your opinions have been noted. If I am not mistaken, we’re in need of some lungs and a liver. We should go and get those while they’re fresh on our minds.”

She rumbles out a complaint, but leads the way up the stairs, dropping the conversation.

“Well,” Velia says, licking a paw clean and surveying the scene Hannibal has laid out, “That is certainly one way to work through your issues on the subject.”

==========

Will’d been at college for a year when it happened. They’d been driving home from a late night grocery run, which would forever leave Brina feeling even more guilty about the whole thing, because she’d been the one to point out how they hadn’t been in over a week and didn’t even have any Ramen left, when the car hit them. Neither of them had even seen it coming, hadn’t even noticed headlights of another car on the back road shortcut Will had been taking.

Brina woke up first, blinking her way into consciousness and knowing without even checking that Will was still out. But he was breathing, and that was what was important.

She’d nuzzled at him, licking at his face, trying her best to get his attention and wake him up. They had to get up, get out of this car, or get the car moving if it still would, something. They needed help and ambulances, and Brina didn’t even want to investigate the other car because she couldn’t hear any noises, couldn’t see any movement. She didn’t want to have to see who

was in it, who had died, didn't want to put faces to these beings that she couldn't help hating for hitting them- and it had obviously been their fault- low visibility, being in the wrong lane, probably speeding given the level of impact and how Will had been going slower than usual with his worry of hitting deer on the dark, country road.

When Will didn't wake up, she started paying attention and stressing, convincing herself that his heart rate was down, was slowing.

She'd made the decision at that.

Brina had nosed at the shattered window until it gave up and fell out, smashing into the ground with a loud thud. No movement from the other car; no movement from Will. When she landed, after jumping out of it, she held back a yowl, because that was a definitely broken leg.

Brina had made it roughly a quarter of a mile, of the two miles back to civilization, before the real pain set in- pain that made the leg seem fine. She couldn't feel Will, and she'd panicked momentarily, worrying that he'd died while she was off trying to find help. It had taken her a few frantic moments to realize that, no, she was just too far, she was starting to lose him- it had hurt for a while now, but this? This was torture.

She ended up making it three quarters of a mile before she gave up and collapsed.

In the end, it helped. A motorist saw her in the middle of the road, and upon stopping, had realized she was a daemon and not just a wild dog. They'd coaxed her awake and she'd whimpered out the situation, guiding them back to Will and the other car. She'd done a lot of drifting in and out of consciousness, always waking to gentle daemon hands, lifting her onto stretchers, or off of the ground to rest on the seat when she'd collapsed; there were voices all telling her how she'd done a good job, probably saved Will's life- definitely saved Will's life.

When she'd finally really woken up, it had been nose to nose with Will, who was curled up against her in the hospital bed, hand clutching tight at her.

"Let's not ever do that again, okay?" he'd asked, and she'd laughed until she was sobbing against him.

Velia had been the one to prod Hannibal into running away, into searching for his aunt and uncle. He'd found the addresses on the pile of letters he'd unearthed in the house, but he'd been hesitant, unsure of what to do. Velia had listened to his worries, soothing them down. She'd reasoned away all of his well thought out excuses.

When they'd gotten to the house, she'd been the one to convince him to trust Lady Murasaki when she'd reached out to him. She'd befriended Genji, making sure to talk about how lovely the crane was whenever Hannibal brought him up.

She'd pointed out all the ways Lady Murasaki and Genji had helped when they'd killed the butcher.

Even throughout his schooling, she made sure to point out all the ways that Lady Murasaki showed her interest, showed that she cared, all the ways they shouldn't forget about the family he'd found and just move on.

And then they'd found Mischa's killers. They'd started hunting them down, slaughtering them just as ruthlessly as they'd slaughtered his entire family, taking their life as callously as they'd taken Hannibal's.

Grutas… Grutas had happened. Messy and bloody and violent and painful in so many ways.

The worst- the worst might not have even been the revelation about Mischa and Nikolas. The worst might very well have been the way Lady Murasaki had looked at them afterward. The way the damned crane had turned his face away.

The way another piece of Hannibal had shattered, and the way that time had been Velia's fault.

==========

Will wakes up with a start- a fox's screech still echoing around in his head, even as he focuses on breathing, focuses on who he is and where he is. He presses his eyes closed, counts his breaths until he loses count, and then looks toward the clock. It's just past seven, but he doesn't care about that information so much as the fact that Alana is sitting in the chair that he's pretty sure Hannibal was in when he last fell asleep.

He forces a self deprecating smile, "Finally realize you wanted to take me up on that date?"

She laughs, but not meanly- he's pretty sure Alana couldn't do anything meanly if she tried- and he feels a real smile take over. It's the first in ages, and it feels good, especially when she reciprocates it. She reaches out and smooths her hand over top of his, answering, "You caught me. Figured out my secret hospital fetish."

He laughs, taken by surprise, and then flips his hand to squeeze hers, "So, how'd you land Will-sitting duty?"

She makes a face at the job description, but doesn't hesitate to respond, "I demanded it. Hannibal Lecter is a practicing doctor with paying patients, and even if he doesn't quite believe it, he's human just like the rest of us- I sent him home to get some sleep."

"No other competition for the position, then," Will answers, letting his eyes drift closed, but not letting go of Alana's hand.

She doesn't pull back either, "There were a couple of people I had to stare down, but I definitely won."

"How long have you been here?" he asks, ignoring the lie.

"A couple of hours."

He pauses for a moment, trying to decide if asking is okay, and finally deciding that if he can't ask Alana, he can't ask anyone. “How long have I been here?”

He opens an eye to see Orione scrunching his face up from his position on her shoulder, so he adds on to the question, “That long?”

She swats at her marmoset's tail and shakes her head, “Not quite. It's been a couple of days since you woke up last. You've had everyone pretty worried, Will.”

“Everyone?” He raises an eyebrow at her, incredulous.

As if in answer, he feels Brina shifting at the end of the bed, crawling on her belly up alongside his side, settling to rest her head on his hip. He reaches down, running his fingers across her ears, something that's always comforted both of them.

“Yes, everyone, hush you. Abigail, Jack, Beverly, me. Hannibal.”

Will's not conscious of the face he makes at Hannibal's name, but he clearly makes one, because he watches as Alana makes one in return. He’s too tired to decipher it, though. His eyelids are heavy and Alana’s saying something, but it doesn’t quite sink in before he’s dozing off.

Will’s bored. He’s been in the hospital two weeks now- two weeks, almost an entire week of that feeling completely fine- and at this point they’re just keeping him to observe him, and he feels like he’s on suicide watch or something, which is just ridiculous, just absolutely ridiculous. As if he had any desire to- as if he couldn’t effectively do it, if he wanted to, even with them checking in on him every fifteen minutes like clockwork. Brina’s bored, too, but she’s much better at hiding it. She’s trying to keep him- or, more so, them both- occupied by whatever means she can think of. So far they’ve chatted, she’s told him ridiculous stories she’s made up about the nurses and their daemons, she’s wheedled him into playing games they played when they were younger to keep out of trouble.

But Will is bored.

He’s just snapped at a nurse, made her cry and huff out of the room, when the door opens. As he turns to glare at whatever nurse has come to rebuke him, he’s taken by surprise to see Abigail.

She offers him a tentative smile, which he returns, and she says, “I hope you don’t mind me stopping by? Hannibal mentioned you were in here, and I was stopping by for a follow up to a test, and…”

“No, no, not at all, it’s fine,” Will replies, smiling at her.

She smiles back, stepping further into the room and closing the door.

“How are you feeling?” she asks, moving to sit on the chair beside his bed.

He makes a face, and Brina huffs out a laugh against him. “I’m ready to leave. I feel fine, I’m tired of lying around with everyone watching me like…“

Abigail waits for a second, then continues for him, “…like you’re going to do something stupid, just because you got hurt?”

He startles a bit. He hadn’t thought about just how bad it had to be for her, when he’d been the one in the chair and she’d been the one in the bed. He nods, though, and she offers up a companionable smile. Her daemon peeks up at them, crawling out of her coat pocket. She reaches down to catch him, letting him settle in her hand and mindlessly stroking his fur with a finger, and they sit in silence for a bit.

Brina’s dozing off against him when Abigail speaks up again, “Do you ever have nightmares?”

Brina tenses, but Will soothes a hand down her back. Abigail can ask him whatever she’d like to ask him; he owes her that much, at least.

“Yeah. I… yeah.”

She nods, “And they’re so real? And you can’t wake up, even though you know?”

He grimaces a little, but gives her some more to work with, “And sometimes, waking up isn’t enough to chase them off.”

She bites her lip, “I don’t know what- I mean- well, Hannibal said that maybe I should ask you about them?”

“I thought your therapist was-“

“Oh, no, no, he didn’t say it as a therapist, just as a friend. I mentioned that I don’t know how to deal with them sometimes, and he thought maybe… well, I hope you don’t mind that he suggested it, but he said maybe you might have some suggestions?”

“Not at all,” Will says, “I, uh, I don’t think I really have any suggestions, though.”

“Oh.” Her voice is so small and Will aches a little with the urge to help this girl, this girl that he’s already failed in so many ways.

“I don’t know if it would help you, but, uh, my nightmares are pretty violent. I mean, I’ve been in the hospital for how long now? But Hannibal, he’s helped me figure out how to kind of…” he makes a face, searching for the right word, until Brina offers up a quiet suggestion.

“Ground?”

“Yes, ground. Hannibal’s helped me figure out how to kind of ground myself, remember where I am.”

She nods, “I don’t have any trouble with that, but it might help anyway?”

So he tells her about Hannibal's suggestions, about the ways he keeps up with his name and who he is and where he is and when he is, and she smiles at him and thanks him like he's just lifted a weight off of her shoulders. It makes him smile, makes him feel accomplished in a way he hasn't felt in a while.

When she's left, Brina snuffles against him, murmuring, "I don't know why Hannibal didn't just share his advice with her. Why make you tell her?"

Will doesn't answer, but he can't help thinking that maybe Hannibal had told her to ask so that Will could help her. Hannibal knows, after all, how much Will's uselessness surrounding all things Abigail frustrates him.

Alana's moving around the kitchen, shooing him away when he so much as gets up from the table. The dogs are underfoot, Orione is in a tizz and chirping angrily at them, and she's got three things on the stove going. It's stressing him out, just a little bit, and in turn is stressing Brina out.

"Sit, now!" Brina finally barks, and all six of the dogs hurry to obey.

Alana grins at Brina, and Orione huffs out a breath, catching Brina's eye, "Thank you." Brina just nods primly in response. Alana keeps whirling around cooking, but there's a significant decrease in insanity in the kitchen.

When she's finally got dinner fixed, settled between them at Will's kitchen table, she relaxes a bit. Orione hops down to eat alongside them, while Brina takes hers next to Will, still leaning against his legs. She's been reluctant to leave his side since they got out of the hospital.

"You just keep getting Will-sitting duty," Will says, shaking his head and giving her an apologetic smile.

She rolls her eyes at him and brandishes her fork, "Don't make me start flicking vegetables at you to get you to drop that."

He laughs, clear and happy, and lights up even more when she laughs with him. For a moment, he's caught up in how perfect this moment is, how it's everything he's wanted for ages- except, it's not really what he wants anymore, is it? He's content enough, just as things are, enjoying this meal with his friend.

"So how'd you land it this time?" he asks, and she winks at him.

"I tricked Jack. He wanted to come see you, but I didn't think it would be quite as enjoyable as dinner with me."

He snorts out a laugh, inelegant around a forkful of pasta, and nods, trying not to choke. When he's recovered, and she's stopped laughing, he tells her, "You've got that right."

She frowns at her plate, continuing, "He wants to pester you to come back to work."

“That’s-“

She cuts his response off, “It’s selfish and inadvisable.”

When he looks up at her, surprised, she continues, “You need some time, Will. I don’t know if you missed the last few weeks or not, but the last crime scene almost killed you, Will. You lost yourself and it almost killed you. You need a break. You need some time to be Will, without all of those bodies and psychopaths pressing in all around you.”

“Not disagreeing,” he says, shrugging halfheartedly at her.

“Good. And you’d better not change your mind. Hannibal and I-“

“Hannibal’s in on this, too?” he asks, surprised. He knows that they’re colleagues, even have the occasional dinner, but he never really put together that he’d be a topic of conversation among them.

“Yes, Hannibal’s in on this. Honestly, Will, have you met the man? I’m hard-pressed to think of another person more preoccupied with your well being, and that’s coming from me, of all people.”

He laughs, happy and warm, “Well, I promise. I’ll tell Jack that I’m taking some time.”

“Good.”

They eat in companionable silence for a bit, until one of the dogs starts whining and gets him started on a story about the day he found that one.

==========

Hannibal’s first kill, his first crime scene, was the butcher, a man that was perhaps more of a pig than the animals he slaughtered for a living. It was rather sporadic- merely a few hours passed between him suggesting it and Velia considering it. At his suggestion, she had shrugged, tilted her head, and responded with an almost flippant, “We could, though.” And that had been the deciding factor.

The kill hadn’t been glamorous, had been quickly executed and- looking back later- sloppy. He’d come under uncomfortable scrutiny. Despite all of that, the murder had been exhilarating, and he’d discovered that he had natural talent.

Velia had made remarkably short work of his bulldog, a quick swipe to the throat and things had been taken care of on her end. She’d settled down, watching as he toyed with the butcher, cleansing her paw and ready to pounce should Hannibal need her.

When he‘d finished, when he’d beheaded the foul man, when he’d set it out as an offering to Murasaki and her ancestors, he’d taken a moment to revel in what has just happened.

“We could do that, you know,” Velia had said after a bit, reveling in the contentment they’d both felt. “We could do that. We could take them *all* out, hunt them down. Find them and kill them.”

He’d glanced over, seen her teeth bared, still bloody from her assistance in moving the body at the lake and helping arrange the head just right, and he’d felt--- he’d felt something other than loneliness and anger and loss. He’d felt full and right and like maybe the world did have some beauty left in it after all.

Will wasn’t sure, even years later, how he’d ended up at his first murder scene. He’d technically been on desk duty, but they’d been short staffed and he’d ended up on the team of responders when the call came in. It had been an ugly scene, brutal and violent and bloody. There’d been four bodies, a married couple and their daemons, and it seemed almost mindless, the violence.

Something about it had left Will unsettled. Brina had noticed, nudging against him curiously, and he’d waved her off, going to help the others take statements from the neighbors. He’d helped out until they got dismissed, the forensics team taking over, but Will hadn’t been able to let go of it.

He’d spent three days talking it over with Brina, hashing out how the man who’d done it- and it had definitely been a man, too much force and anger, he was sure forensics would back him up with evidence, though- must have gotten in, how his daemon had to be a bird of some sort, how the man had almost certainly known the couple.

When it had clicked, when he realized that they’d interviewed a neighbor who fit all of his assumptions, he’d gone in and pushed the issue, with Brina backing him up with lies about scents, until they’d brought the man in for questioning.

Will had been right.

Will dreamt for weeks about the murder, about the details he couldn’t possibly know, but details that had to be right; he couldn’t get it out of his head, until his boss called him up and directed him to the next one.

==========

Hannibal can feel Velia almost vibrating in the backseat, regardless of Brina seated directly next to her. He ignores it, knowing that she is livid- livid that Will is out and taking on a case, livid that it’s their scene, livid that Hannibal had insisted on going to it. In the mirror, he can see Brina looking at Velia oddly. They both start, however, when Brina reaches out, nudging at Velia’s leg with her nose until Velia stops, loosens up a bit.

“Everything okay?” Will asks, clearly surprised by the action as well, and Hannibal waves a hand.

“Velia is just tense,” Hannibal replies, pausing so that he can pointedly look at Will, making sure WIll sees him doing so, “We both are. We’re quite worried, Will. This is far too soon for you to be returning to Jack’s scenes, looking things over and losing yourself.”

“I know. But I can’t just turn him down, not on something like this,” Will says, frowning at the road as he drives, “He’s positive this one’s the Ripper. It sounds like it is, too. It’s not a copycat, too original for that, but I think this one… well, I think this one’s actually the Ripper. And it’s been a while since we’ve had a case from him.”

“Weren’t you investigating one just before the Hall case?”

“That one wasn’t the Ripper. Just a particularly demented one off.” Hannibal frowns. He’d known that, of course, but he’s not sure when Will figured it out. Will keeps going, “Besides, I’ve got you guys with me; you won’t let me get lost.”

The casual way Will says it would leave Hannibal reeling, noticeably, if they didn’t arrive at that precise moment. Hannibal is relatively certain that no one has ever placed their well being in his hands before. Will climbs out of the car, Brina nudging Velia one last time before hopping out and trotting after him.

“Well that was-”

“Not now, Velia.” Hannibal cannot possibly keep his calm at this scene if he goes in already unsettled.

She huffs, but it’s nothing Hannibal can’t deal with. They follow Will closely, earning themselves glares from Jack and his Shepherd. Hannibal ignores the glares, pretends not to notice the way Velia flicks her tail imperiously in the Shepherd’s face, tries not to just return the glares full force. He’s heard what Jack’s been suggesting, heard the others talking about how he’s trying to get Will to give up his sessions with Hannibal, the sessions that so long ago stopped being sessions and started being what could- whether Hannibal admits it or not- be called a friendship. Jack thinks Hannibal’s holding Will back from catching the Ripper; Jack thinks that Hannibal doesn’t seem to be doing any good, especially after that Hall case and the fiasco that followed it; Jack thinks Will needs to see other people.

Hannibal thinks that it’s a shame he can’t carve Jack up like a Jack O’Lantern. He would even put some candles in his eyes, maybe stuff him full of poisoned candy. He forces himself away from that train of thought, turning his attention to the scene.

“What do we have?” Will’s asking, and Jack’s responding.

Hannibal doesn’t listen, he knows exactly what they’ll find in there, what Jack will say. He’s a little apprehensive about this. Perhaps Velia’s nerves are right, and they shouldn’t be here. He’s not in the habit of visiting his own crime scenes, far too predictable for serial killers after all. He’s particularly not in the habit of visiting those crime scenes with the FBI. Especially not the head of Behavioral Sciences who is far more interested in him than he would like.

And yet, here he is.

They go in, Hannibal following along, despite more glares from Jack. Velia's strutting, head held high and nerves hidden, leveling Jack with a glare that dares him to argue with this. Hannibal's fine if they do start to argue it; he's got Alana Bloom on speed dial, an ace up the sleeve, primed and ready to go, all on his side.

Katz is coming out as they head in, shaking her head.

Will says something to her that Hannibal doesn't catch, but she nods in response, saying, "This one has to be him. Has to."

The scene they find is as lovely as Hannibal remembered it. Melodramatic, yes, but lovely.

She'd been particularly short with him months before, when he'd inquired as to a book the card catalogue had proclaimed available that wasn't on the shelves. He'd checked where it should have been, had Velia help him check the shelves surrounding, and finally resorted to talking to the librarian on duty. When she'd rolled her eyes and sighed before getting up, leading the way and acting as if he were just too slow to figure out how their shelving system worked, he had tried to maintain his patience. That had been the nicest she'd been, though, because from there- well, from there she'd gone on to be mutilated five months later.

The scene is far more melodramatic than usual, though. As a rule, he tries not to let scenes reflect his moods, but he'd certainly had no reservations about working through his frustration that night.

Velia's laughter and her declaration about working through an issue still rang in his head as he looked at it.

She was sprawled out amidst a pile of romantic self help books, pieces of the book Velia had threatened him with had replaced her eyes. He'll admit, that touch was really unnecessary.

"Lungs are missing," Zeller is saying, when he forces his attention away from the display and to the men examining it. He really should be paying more attention, all things considered, but it was so easy to be distracted. Besides, Velia was paying enough attention for both of them, she'd help him dissect it later. It's not often one gets a chance to see, up close and personal, how close the FBI is to discovering that the serial killer's been working with them for ages.

He wonders if they've found that the liver was absent, too, or if they're not quite competent enough to have picked up on that yet.

He watches as Will leans forward, just a bit, looking a bit lost in something, hand reaching out for just a moment, mimicking the snapping of a neck-

"Just enough to disable her, keep her from running," Will is murmuring, and Hannibal feels a thrill run through him. Will shouldn't be able to tell that, just from looking. The things that must happen in his brain- he's appreciated those things before, but this is a new level. This, this shows him just how accurate his Will really is.

"Are you sure?" Zeller asks, picking up as if the conversation had been going for a bit rather than just starting. He's apparently worked with Will enough to understand that the

fragmented bits are all he'll get for a while.

"Definitely," Will answers, "She felt everything, right up until…"

Until he'd slid the knife in, gutting her like one would a fish. It had seemed fitting, given the expressions she'd made throughout the ordeal.

No longer distracted, Hannibal sets about observing Will, doing his best not to seem obvious.

"It doesn't make any sense," Will says on the drive back to Hannibal's.

"Oh?" Hannibal asks, trying not to seem too eager with his questioning. It isn't too hard, as the afternoon has left Hannibal rather tongue tied, at a loss for words. He's seen Will in the aftermath of working through a scene more times than he could count at this point, has even seen him in the midst of a scene a few times. He's never seen Will in the midst of a Ripper scene, though.

It had been exhilarating- addicting, amazing- watching as Will correctly called out his movements, listening as Will went over the frustrations he was feeling, seeing Will try to figure him out like that… It had been odd, watching Will- Will, who he already had all these feelings for- understand him in a way that no one had ever understood him. He hadn't even sounded judgmental, just amazed.

Sure, watching the others bumble around has helped ease his mind, showing how incredibly far from catching even the faintest hint of him the FBI is, but it had also been incredibly unsettling to watch Will slip into his mindset, like slipping on a familiar robe.

"Yeah. It's. The Ripper, he's not about emotion. He kills them- I think he kills them as a food source, actually- but he kills them because they're just animals to him. There's nothing more to it than that, some anger, maybe, no, definitely. But that's all it is. Rage and dehumanization. This one, he put time and effort and thought into this one. This one. I can't decide if the self help books, were those on purpose?"

There is a pause while Will thinks it over, as Hannibal tries not to be deeply unimpressed by the ridiculous question, before Will continues, "Of course they were on purpose, everything he does is on purpose. He's feeling different. He's working through some things, and this is- this might be what does it, you know? Where he loses it, where he starts to slip. The next scene, maybe it will have something else, and if not, the one after?"

Will's excitement is a double edged blade- thrilling to have caused, but chilling to examine.

So Hannibal puts it out of his mind, to examine later, when Will is not around to see the fallout.

==========

Brina didn't trust them. She made that clear the first time they met them, in Jack's office. She made it clear the second time, when Hannibal and Velia had shown up with food. She'd made it clear during the search for Hobbs, during the drive to Hobbs', during the Hobbs ordeal. She'd made it clear in Hannibal's office, in Will's home, in Will's classroom.

Brina did not trust this man and his leopard.

The man didn't smell right- he smelled like, she couldn't place it. Almost dangerous, though. He wasn't what he was pretending to be, she was positive of that. The problem was that she didn't know what he was pretending to be, or what that left him being.

And the leopard! Felines, she'd learned in her life, weren't innately trustworthy in the first place. This one, attached to this man, was even less so than most. It hadn't escaped Brina's notice that she would prod him, just gently, as if reminding him of basic functions.

Brina was used to voicing her opinions on people, used to calling them out to Will and warning him.

Brina wasn't used to Will ignoring her, though.

Velia wasn't exactly subtle with her opinion of Brina and Will.

Useless, dense, dull, unsocialized, immature; her list really was quite long. After every meeting with the two, she had more adjectives to add to it. Hannibal had tossed a thesaurus toward her one day, asking her to switch it up, she told him the list so often.
Hannibal just wouldn't listen to it, wouldn't admit how true the list was.

It was lucky, however, that he wouldn't. If he had listened, they definitely would have missed out on one of the more interesting people they'd ever met, would have missed out on a daemon with tenacity that quite possibly rivaled her own.

She'd never met someone more prone to using assumptions as a defense, hiding behind them in an effort to have people glance over them and move on. Behind those defenses, though, was a man who was almost as sharp as- if not as sharp as- and God forbid if he ended up being sharper than- her Hannibal.

And Brina, she might not be quite as sharp as Will (although, she might be), but she was undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with.

There was no doubt in Velia's mind that Brina would go to any lengths to protect Will, to keep him as safe as she could.

For once, Velia was pleased that Hannibal hadn't listened to her.

==========

Will's sleeping, actually sleeping, when he wakes up with a start. Brina blinks awake with him, yawning a bit and stretching, shifting to look at him.

“Whatsit?” she slurs out, and he shrugs. The dogs are all sleeping soundly in the floor, not moving at all, and she clearly didn’t hear anything. It wasn’t a nightmare, though. He’s just not sure what woke him up.

He stands up, stretching and heading toward the kitchen, waving her off when she moves to get up and follow him. He watches as she debates for a second before clearly deciding her sleep is more important, given his relatively calm state.

He makes himself some tea. It’s fancier than anything he’d buy, so Hannibal must have left it. Hopefully he’ll remember to mention it tomorrow, to thank him or apologize for using it if it was a mistake. Whichever.

He’s trying to remember when Hannibal even had tea at his house, and when he catches it, he starts cracking up.

It had been a long day, full of patients that rattled his nerves and left him stressed, even if he didn’t admit it, wouldn’t talk about them. The closest he’d come was to tell Will about how hard it is to deal with people who analyze themselves for him, coming in with preconceived ideas of what their disorders or malfunctions are, coming in and telling him what he needed to do to fix them- in depth. Someone had come in after reading some self help book- which one had he mocked? Prayers for Partners or something like-

Will’s breath catches in his chest. He’s choking on the tea, and he can feel his eyes glazing over. He doesn’t know if he’s about to have an episode, or maybe just drown to death on this tea, or if he’s just trying to drown out his thoughts, trying to miss this entirely.

Brina rushes out, headbutting against his chest, knocking him out of his panic, and he locks eyes with her.

“What leftovers do we have in the fridge?” he asks, voice barely a whisper.

“Will-”

“What. Leftovers. Do we have in the fridge?”

She hesitates, but heads to it, hitting the lever for her to get it open, and she noses at a couple of containers.

“That stew Hannibal made. Some beef liver. The sausage he left- he leaves a lot of food for us, doesn’t he? Oh, those weird things, that stuff he made, with the lungs in it?” she makes a face as she says it, and his heart stutters.

“Will? Will, come on, what’s wrong?”

“We’ve got to. Fuck. I don’t know what we’ve got to do.”

“Will?”

“Hannibal.”

“Will-”

“Romantic self help. Lungs. Liver.”

It’s a hardship to even get that out, so he’s thankful when Brina puts it together, sitting down hard on the floor in front of him. She rests her head on his lap, and he puts his hand on her head.

“What do we… what do we do? Do we… should we… do we call Jack?”

“What options do we even have?” he asks, looking down at her. He waits a second and then slides down to sit beside her, forcing her head off of his lap. She relocates it to his shoulder and huffs against his ear.

She moves slightly, as if toward the phone, and he stops her. She looks at him, and he shakes his head, answering his own question, “Our options… Brina, our options are keeping Hannibal or losing him. Keeping Velia or losing her. Those are our options, Brina, that’s what it boils down to.”

She whines, and he knows she had to have put that together already, but he can’t handle hearing it out loud either.

“When did we- when did this happen?” he asks.

She doesn’t even ask for clarification, just snorts. “I warned you from the beginning to stay away from him, but you couldn’t listen.”

“Happened to you, too,” he murmurs.

She nods, “I know. Doesn’t mean I wasn’t right, though.”

“Fuck. Fuck.” Will says, and she comes back, leaning against him again. “Fuck.”

==========

They were in the middle of stalking an accountant when the call came. His phone had shrilled to life, and Velia had sighed, watching as he answered it unapologetically. They were still in the car, so it wasn’t like it was particularly distracting to what they were doing; it wasn’t going to alert the guy they were watching; but it was annoying nevertheless.

She’d watched as he answered, listened to his quiet responses, and then startled as he hung up, pale and flustered.

“Will returned to the Hall’s. They don’t think he knew what he was doing.”

It wasn’t a particularly shocking revelation, so she’d just nodded.

“The killer had returned, too.”

That's a little more unsettling, but nothing to be quite so pale about. If he'd been killed, Hannibal would have led with that.

"Will's in the hospital; he was attacked."

Hannibal had started the car, and she was sure they were heading to the hospital.

"Brina's with him. They got her before he snapped out of it."

When she'd heard those words, her whole body had shuddered, and Velia had realized- then and there- that this wasn't just a growing fondness for the coyote she'd been feeling.

She'd let that sink in for just a moment before finally speaking up, "They'll be okay. They have to be."

Brina didn't have a particular 'aha' moment in relation to her feelings regarding Velia. It was more a gradual wearing down.

She'd started their acquaintanceship with an overlying feeling of distrust. She'd hated them, despised them, hadn't trusted them at all.

As they'd gotten to know the two, through sessions and home visits and discussions, after following Will and his sleepwalking, protective and vicious as she was while doing it, into Hannibal Lecter's arms one too many times, she'd started to almost trust the two.

Sometime, she wasn't quite sure when- maybe the hospital visit- she'd learned that she didn't so much tolerate them anymore as much as she actually, legitimately, liked the two.

It wasn't until she sat, crouched in the floor with Will muttering curses into her neck, that she realized there was no way she could lose Velia. She couldn't let that happen.

That was when Brina knew she was fucked.

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Hannibal opens the door with more force than he really needs to. He's willing to bet that on the other side of the door will be Will Graham, who he's generally pleased to see, but he was sleeping remarkably well when the pounding at his door began, and given the frustrations the man has been causing in Hannibal's personal time lately, even without being present, Hannibal's patience is running a bit thin. The frustration is more toward himself than Will, but Will plays the role of victim much better than Hannibal ever has. Velia swats at his ankle warningly, and he takes a breath,steadying himself.

As the door does open, Will doesn't even flinch at the force of it. He's not sleepwalking, which Hannibal had rather expected; rather, he's wide awake, looking wired and almost panicked. Brina's pacing behind him when the door opens, but as she makes eye contact with Velia, she stops, almost frozen aside from minute trembling that Hannibal and Velia both notice.

“Will?” Velia asks, breaking the silence that had been threatening to settle in, surprising all of them. Brina rushes in at that, stopping just short of Velia, then paces back to Will, nipping at him until he seems to shock into action and storms in. He almost shoves by Hannibal, which is unexpected. Hannibal hasn’t seen him this brash since those early days- since Hobbs.

“Will?” Hannibal asks, repeating Velia’s inquiry. She’s watching from Hannibal’s side now, crouched slightly, like she’s ready to pounce on something.

As the other two head toward his sitting room, she whispers as low as she can, “This isn’t going to be good, Hannibal. I can smell it. Something’s- it’s not good, whatever has driven him here, Hannibal.”

His veins chill a bit at the tone her voice carries. He’s heard her use that sense of urgency four times in his life, and each time ended up being a moment that would later define him. He walks into the other room after them nevertheless, and he’s not sure who he’s hiding that fear from- himself or Velia, Will or Brina. Perhaps all of them.

When he gets there, Will is already sitting on an armchair, his head in his hands, fingers gripping at his hair. Hannibal is trying to decide what to say to prompt Will into speaking when Will looks up at him. He locks eyes with Hannibal, not shying away or averting them after a moment as he usually does. Despite his obvious nerves, Will’s voice is steady as he asks, “How many people has the Ripper killed, Hannibal?”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, fighting the urge to clench his fingers into fists. He can see Velia’s claws digging lightly into the floor. They cannot both give in, so he holds his facade as he replies. “I’m sure you would know that better than I, Will.”

“Would I? Because I’m pretty sure… fuck. How many people, Hannibal? How many people have you-” Brina moves to press closer to Will as his voice trails off, leaving no space between the two, and he composes himself, continues, “How many people have you killed?”

Velia hisses out a breath, settling by the door. Hannibal doesn’t let himself indulge in such an action. He keeps his face as steady as it was moments before, as steady as it was last week, last month. There may be fear trailing around in the midst of his planning- taking in the objects in the room, what he has at his disposal, but it’s mild. He can take Will Graham, of that he is certain. More than the fear, though, Hannibal has to hide the pride swelling in him. It’s taken Will long enough, certainly, but he knows that he’s helped Will grow. If anyone were going to discover him, he’s rather proud that it’s Will, oddly. None of this slips out, though, instead, he remains calm and collected as he makes his decision. He deserves a reward, his Will.

“More than the FBI knows about,” Hannibal responds, rewarding him with the truth, eyes never leaving Will’s face.

Will leans back in the chair, looking at the ceiling. He makes a move like perhaps he’s going to stand, but gives up halfway through it, forcing out a short and ugly laugh.

Hannibal doesn’t move as Will leans forward, head going between his knees for a moment. It doesn’t last long, however- Will is restless, twitchy, panicked. He rubs his hands over his

face. It's as if he doesn't know what to do.

That seems to be the theme for the night, Hannibal thinks. He is in the midst of that himself, surprisingly. He should move. He should get his knives. He should signal Velia. He should- he's not sure he could do any of that. Maybe once upon a time, if their story had taken a different turn, Hannibal would be able to dismember the man in front of him. Once, he would have gladly taken him apart, tried to figure out how he worked from the inside out, but not now. Not now that he's seen how fascinating Will's spark is, how captivating he is alive. So, he should grab a bag, take Velia and get in the car, leave his things and get out of there. But-

"You fed them to us, didn't you?" Will asks. Before Hannibal can respond, Will shakes his head, "No, you did. It wasn't really a question. Hannibal. It wasn't a question, because of course you did, of course you did."

Will stands up, looking Hannibal in the eyes again, and if Hannibal weren't taken aback by how he looks and the events of the night, he would perhaps comment on the poetry of this- a first meeting with no eye contact to what is surely their last meeting with so much eye contact.

Hannibal's become quite adept, over the years, at finding and identifying human emotions, and the eyes staring back at him have always held the purest ones he's ever seen. But these… Hannibal cannot identify the things looking back at him.

Will stalks off, Brina following closely behind, pausing to share a look with Velia, then bumping her lightly as they pass. She nods at Velia, sighing and trembling before following her Will.

They should stop Will. Instead, they wait a few moments, and Veila breaks the silence that's settled, "They're upstairs."

Hannibal leads the way up the stairs, stopping at the door to his room. Will's sitting on his bed, head in his hands again. He starts talking when they stop. "I woke up, I don't even know why. I'm beginning to think the universe just really hates me, just loathes me. And I was, I was laughing over your tea, drinking your tea and laughing, because you left it that day when you were so- you were so open that day, frustrated and real in a way that you never are, Hannibal. You never seemed real, not until that day. And you bitched about that goddamn book."

Hannibal knows in that instant how Will figured out the Ripper's identity. He curses himself, curses his outburst that day and his outburst at the library.

"And then the fridge- there were leftovers. Liver and lungs, you've been feeding us so much lately."

Hannibal stays silent, hopes that it will translate as waiting before he acts, rather than the act of indecision it really is.

Brina yawns, suddenly, breaking the tense mood. She looks sheepish, and Velia chokes on a laugh beside him, almost as surprising as the yawn.

Velia glances up at Hannibal, then back at Brina, and finally at Will. Then, she's crossing the room, jumping on the bed and curling up in Will's lap, unabashedly flicking her tail against Brina's nose. Will doesn't even hesitate before burying his face against her fur, telling her, "I'm pretty sure the universe hates me."

"This will all look better in the morning," she tells him, sighing and stretching slightly, so that her back paw thumps Brina's face. Brina bites at it, gentle and unsure, but moves to headbutt Will into laying down. When they've settled, Velia looks to Hannibal. He's sure she's telling him something, he just can't bring himself to wrap his head around it.

"Well?" Brina finally asks, glaring over at Hannibal.

So he does the only thing left to do, killing the lights and moving toward the bed.

Brina curls up against his chest immediately, not shying away from touching him, something he would never expect of the coyote. She's softer than he imagined, really. Velia's tail lands in one of his hands. He shifts, the other hand finding the edge of Will's-

And for a moment, nothing happens, and he almost moves, before Will is grabbing his hand, rolling toward him, crushing Brina, breathing against his neck. "I don't. I can't. Hannibal. Hannibal," he's saying, before finally giving in and just muttering an emphatic, "Fuck."

And for the first time in his life, Hannibal gives in and trusts, laughs and responds, "Indeed."

He's not entirely sure where they stand, where things are going, but for once, he gives in and lets himself be optimistic. After all, he has a chestful of coyote and arms full of Will Graham, and his Velia is there, anchoring them down…

It's more than he's ever had.

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